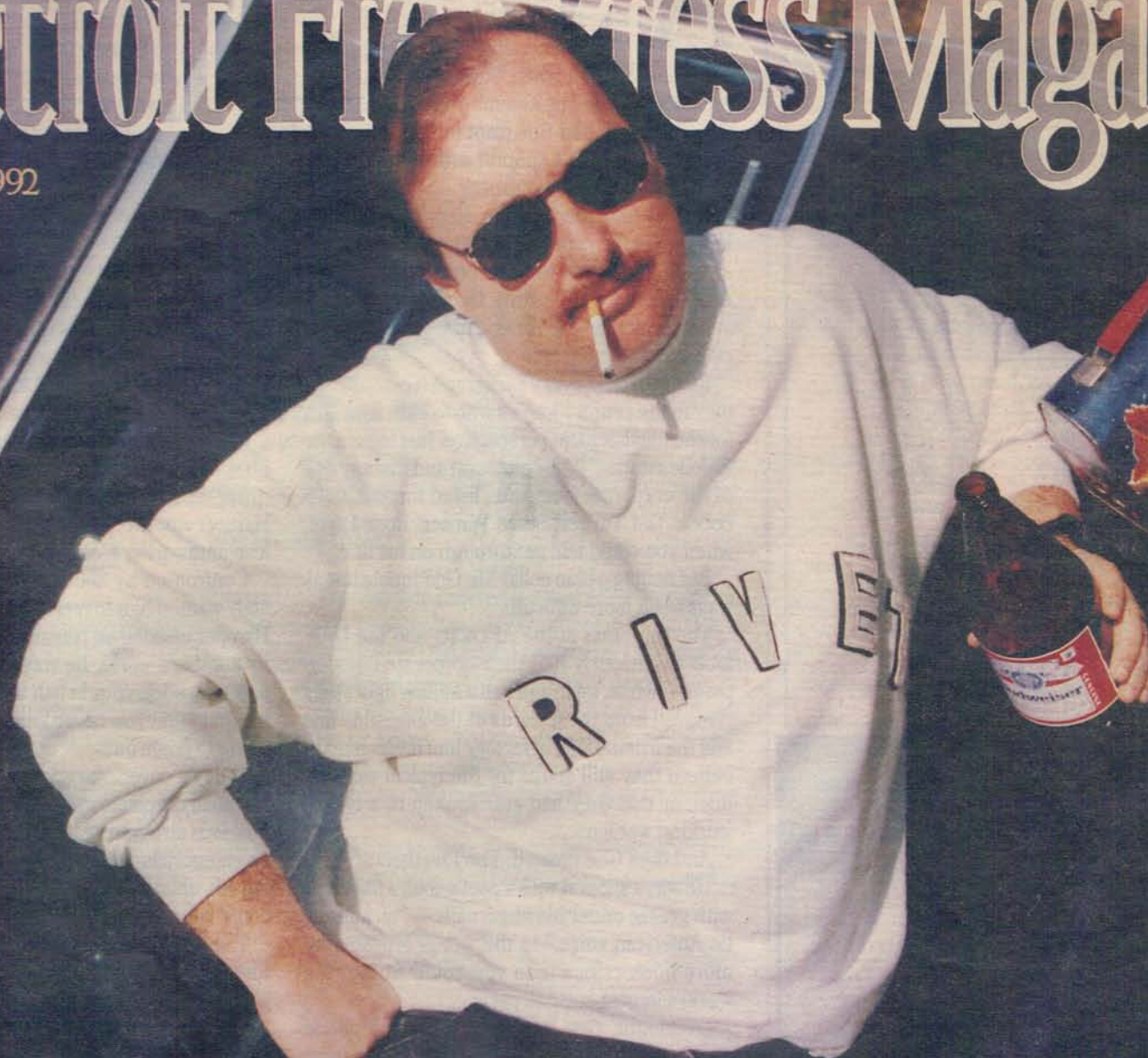


INSIDE: Why Bad Dreams Happen to Good People

Detroit Free Press Dress Magazine

JUNE 7, 1992



Notes
from the
"If the
Nuns
Could
See Me
Now"
Tour

RIVETHEAD ON THE ROAD

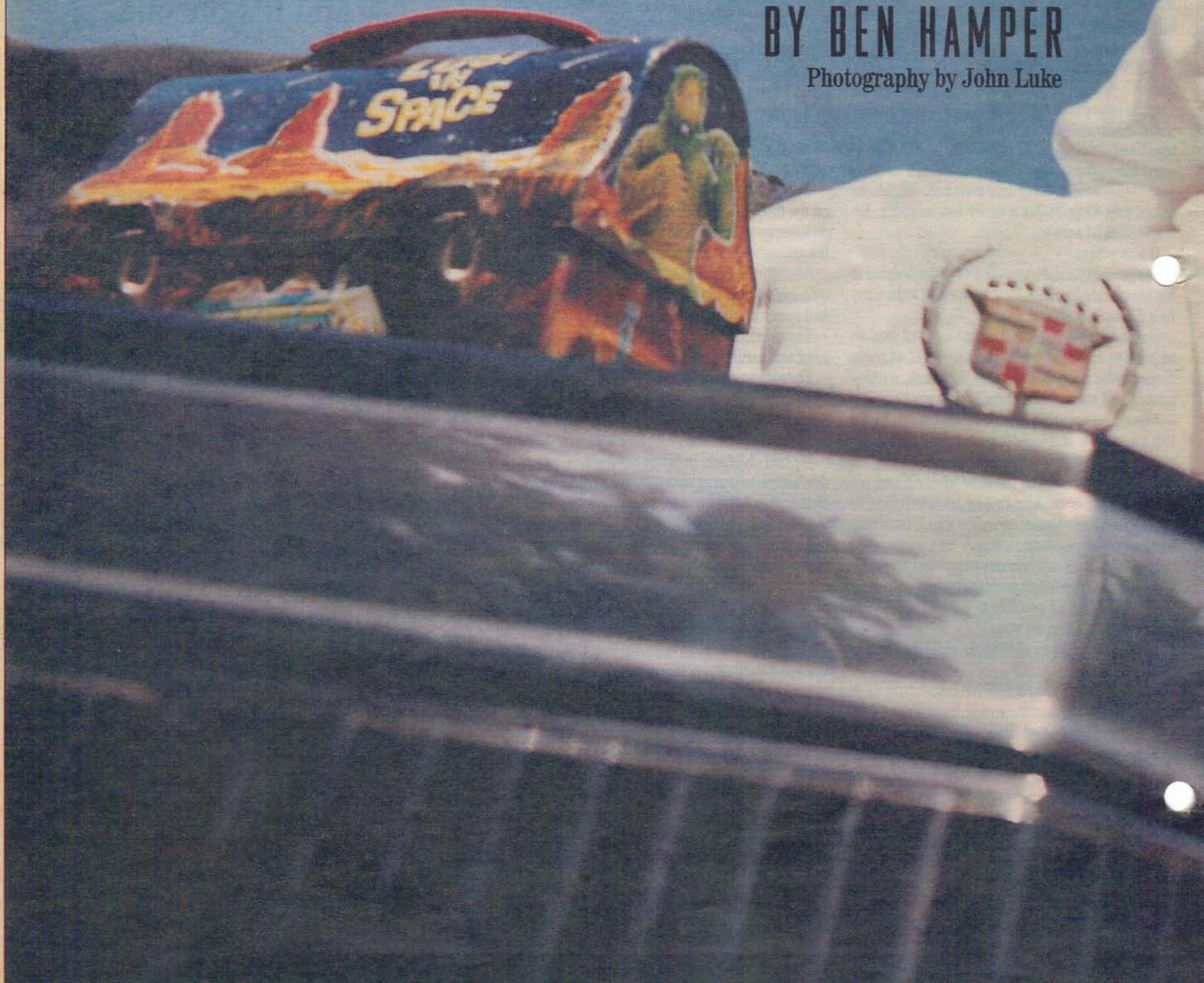
By Ben
Hamper
Author of
"Rivethead"

I WAS AN INSTANT CELEBRITY

For years he was an obscure factory worker, bouncing between the assembly line and a psychiatric clinic. Then, suddenly, everyone wanted a piece of the Rivethead: Hollywood. Letterman. The Today Show. Ronald Reagan's adopted son.

BY BEN HAMPER

Photography by John Luke





I'M SLOUCHED IN A BACK BOOTH INSIDE the Fox & Anchor pub somewhere in London. It's only 9 a.m., but this working man's water hole is already near capacity. Men straggle in from the giant meat processing plant across the street. Many still wear their blood-streaked smocks as they squirm in for ale and elbow room.

The publicity agent whose duty it is to shepherd me through today's press appointments returns to our booth and hands me my second pint of lager. I take a large swallow and turn my attention

to the attractive woman seated across from me who will be conducting this morning's interview. It has been explained to me that she is Sigmund Freud's granddaughter — not an inappropriate turnabout considering my oft-publicized bouts of mental disarray.

The interview sails by smoothly. Ms. Freud frequently lauds the book and quotes various passages. She asks my opinion of the recent London Times' review of "Rivethhead," mentioning that she thought it was quite flattering. (The review began:

"Ben Hamper is a loud, foul-mouthed, pot-smoking drunk.")

"I found it libelous, crass, sensationalistic, rude and profoundly accurate," I tell her.

Freud's granddaughter laughs, shakes my hand and dashes out into the drizzle. The publicity agent announces we must hustle to the next interview. I drain the last of my pint and follow him toward the door. "Who's up next?"

I ask. "Shakespeare's

great-great-grandnephew?" In the cab, I sit back in silence, wondering about everything and nothing at all.

MY IMPROBABLE ASCENT from obscure factory slug to globe-trotting literateur began with a phone call in early 1988. Unbeknownst to me, I'd been dwelling in the literary cross hairs of a young New York agent named David Black. He decided to phone me one afternoon after reading a strange profile of the Rivethead in the Village Voice. Though the piece focused primarily on my expanding notoriety as a blue-collar writer, it also included embellished references to my "satanic shag carpet bachelor pad" and a shrine to Charles Manson, which I allegedly maintained in my dining room.

Fortunately, David Black wasn't interested in such Gerald-esque hearsay. "I've been reading your factory columns," he began. "I honestly believe you have a book inside of you."

"Are you sure you're not just holding someone else's X-rays up to the light?" I asked.

Black told me he was prepared to begin shopping around a book proposal based on my life as a GM factory worker. Was I interested? Two years earlier, I probably would've begged off. But recent developments had jeopardized my future with the General Motors Corporation.

For over a year, I had been plagued by panic attacks. I had spent the last 18 months revolving between the exit door at GM Truck & Bus and the reception desk of the Holly Road Mental Health Clinic. For all the bravado and buffoonery I was peddling via my Rivethead persona, the truth was that Ben Hamper was careening way off course. And although I didn't feel capable of writing a book, I felt even less capable of surviving much longer on an assembly line.

What was there to lose?

Within a week, David Black had found a taker at Warner Books. He mailed me a seven-page contract that I signed and returned unread. I began a crazed pursuit to unearth old notebooks, bar napkins, stock tags — anything that I'd used to stash factory-related lore. Between shifts at either GM or the clinic, I pecked away in the solitude of my backyard pool shed.

I was an author. The idea both tickled and terrified me.

To my delight, I found that Black was far more than just another glib, deal-doling 15 percenter from the bowels of Fifth Avenue. He quickly became my confidant and stabilizer, often calling to correct any noticeable sags in my mopish nature or to inject me with some much needed levity. It's only a book, he reminded me periodically.

Yet all Black's maternal reassurance couldn't keep me out of trouble. In 1989, my doctor recommended that I take a short vacation — on the seventh floor psychiatric ward of McLaren Hospital in Flint. I had allowed myself to become terribly distraught after the first draft of my book was deemed too lengthy by the editors at Warner. I had no idea that this happened to 99 percent of original manuscripts, and I experienced the news as total rejection.

During my "vacation," I made it clear I wanted no visitors; the situation was gloomy enough without friends and family poking in to



After "Roger & Me" became a box office smash, I lost count of how many perfect strangers approached me to inquire about my mental state. "Aren't you the guy from the asylum who was singin' the Beatle tune and shootin' hoops?"

pat my bruised psyche. Black ignored my pleas. He flew in from New York, and drove up from Detroit on a Sunday while I was playing "Win, Lose or Draw" with a group of in-patients. The nurse issued me a one-hour pass to go downstairs and meet him in the main visitor's lobby.

We shook hands and sat down. After I reassured him that I was on the mend, David relaxed and we began to chat about the book.

While other patients sat with relatives who assured them that "the dog is being well cared for" or urged them to "please leave the worrying to us," my agent got down to business, saying things like, "We're already getting feelers for the British rights" and "Fax me a copy of Chapter Six at your earliest convenience." I sat there giggling in my hospital gown and slippers. It all had the feel of a Mel Brooks movie.

Reinvigorated, I returned home and pared the book down to a comfortable length.

Black had been right; it was neither rocket science nor bypass surgery. I made a promise to myself: From then on it was either going to be fun or forget it.

WHILE ASSEMBLING "Rivethead," I was contacted by my old friend Michael Moore, the brave soul who provided my first writing outlet by way of his Michigan Voice newspaper. He wanted to interview me for a film he was concocting entitled "Roger & Me."

Moore making a film made about as much sense as the Rivethead running for Congress. But I played along. Michael and his crew interviewed me at several different locations. Segments found me haranguing my supervisors in front of the factory, performing a self-penned worker's anthem called "Rat Like Me" with a rock band in a recording studio, cracking wise about my vast knowledge of the unemployment office on the deck of my pool, and describing my first panic attack while positioned right in front of the Holly Road Mental Health Clinic. I kept thinking that someday this was going to make for one very goofy home movie.

A year later, I was standing outside Lincoln Center in New York after taking in an early, sold-out showing of "Roger & Me." As critics and TV crews trumped by me to pay homage to Mike and his film, he looked over at me and shrugged as if to say: "Only in America!"

As I wait for Mike to untangle himself from the media barrage, several departing moviegoers pause to throw an arm around me and wish me a sound recovery. I attribute this to the fact that my only appearance in the film was the segment featuring me at the mental health center — roughly a minute's worth of me grousing about my panic ordeal, along with some footage of me playing basketball and warbling a horrendous a capella snippet from the Beach Boys' "Wouldn't It Be Nice." Sweet Jesus, the ugly sacrifices one must make for the sake of true, unblemished art.

After "Roger & Me" became a box office smash, I lost count of how many perfect strangers approached me to inquire about my mental state. "Aren't you the guy from the asylum who was singin' the Beatle tune and shootin' hoops?" one would ask.

"Actually," I'd respond politely, "it was a Beach Boys' song. And I was not in an asylum!"

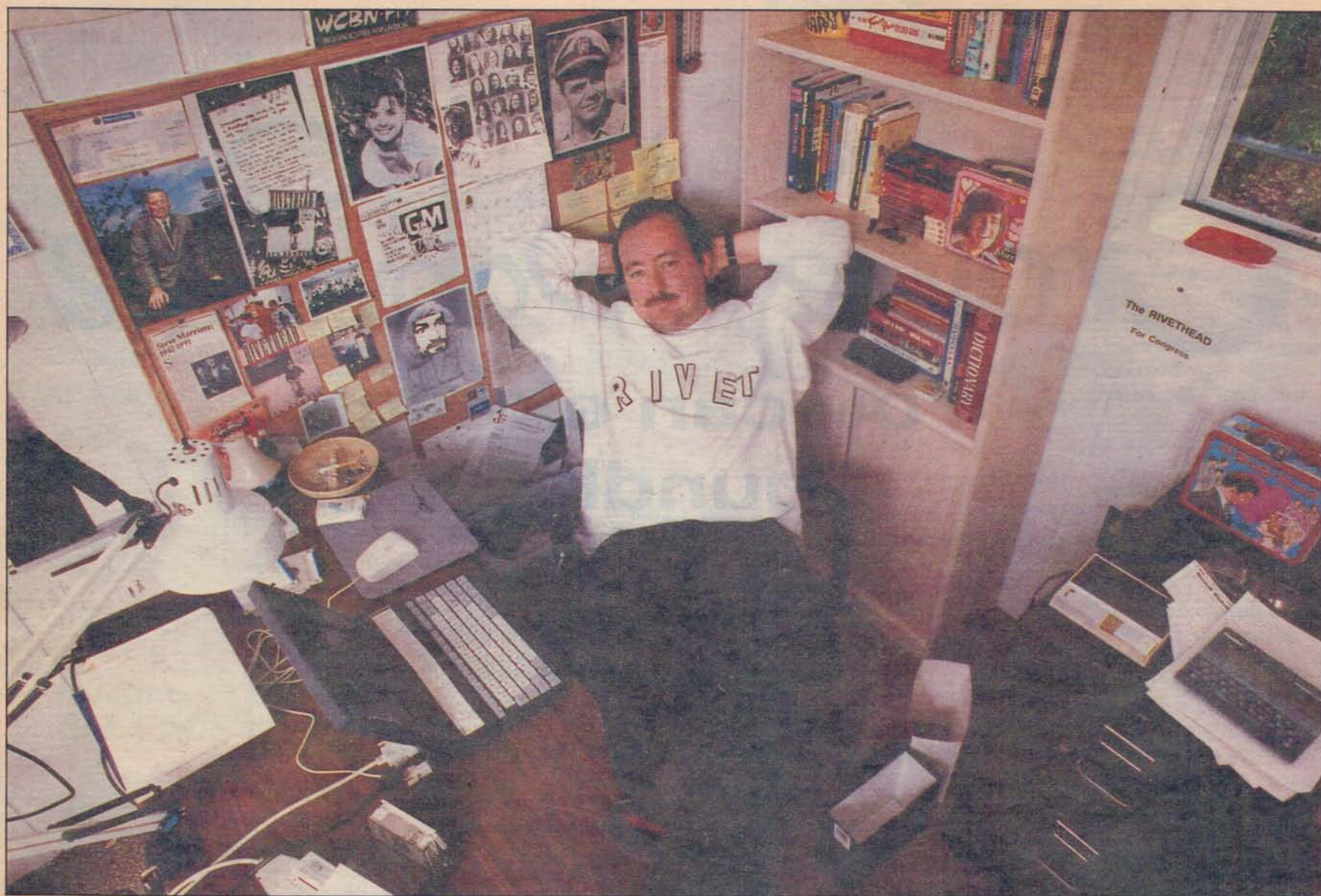
"Anyway, hope you get better."

"RIVETHEAD" FINALLY HIT the shelves in July. The reviews were very gracious. Newsweek called it "funny, foul-mouthed, yet touching." The Los Angeles Times declared, "America still knows a fresh voice when she hears one, and here's one that is not only worth listening to but a pleasure besides." Fortune magazine noted, "Hamper's writing is strong, lively, and as corrosively funny as a whoopee cushion filled with acid."

Huh?

Of course, there's always got to be one sorehead in the shrubs. In feature articles that appeared in USA Today and People magazine, GM spokesman John Mueller opined: "We don't believe that

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Ben Hamper has been the subject of several radio interviews from the comfort of his pool shed office, which sits behind his home in Fenton, near Flint.

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Hamper's interpretation is shared by other GM employees who are hardworking people who take great pride in producing top-quality products." (Don't use that tone with me, Johnny. I can smell a carefully-constructed press release all the way from Motown to your fledging homestead in Mexico. And, just for the hell of it, who are "we?")

Of much more personal importance, a positive review of the book showed up in an issue of *Solidarity*, the monthly magazine published by the UAW. I had half-expected the UAW reviewer to scold me for telling tales out of class or conjuring up negative images

of autoworkers. Instead, the review applauded my candor and dubbed me "the Elvis Presley of blue-collar writers." Thank yuh. Lemme buy that man a Cadillac!

Everyone was talking about the Rivethead, from the tedious review section of the *New York Times* to the teenybopper monthly *Sassy*. I'm still not sure if the *Times* review was good, bad or indifferent; the reviewer lost me halfway through thanks to words such as "cotermious" and "anomie." And I still don't know how to react to the observation, "Hyperbole is Mr. Hamper's meat." Call me a prude, but does such a vulgar disclosure really belong in a family newspaper?

Conversely, the review in

Sassy was a breeze to grasp. All one had to do was consult a rating chart at the top of the page that awarded between one and five little red circles per book. "Rivethead" collected five little red circles, which equated to "well-crafted, fully realized, a postmodern pastiche." Thankfully, the sweet-hearted adolescent who dispensed the little red circles didn't brand me with one circle grading, a judgment that decreed "made out of doody."

My hometown newspaper, the *Flint Journal*, printed two reviews of the book: one by their staff book critic and the other by the Rivethead himself. The *Journal* critic called it "a hell of a book ... it just may be the best insider's view ever written about

factory life in America."

Not wanting to risk coming off as some kind of pompous megalomaniac, I humbly referred to the book as "undistorted blue collar realism." I went on to assert that "Rivethead" was indisputably "the best book I have read this year," but hastened to add that it was also the only book I had read in the last 12 months.

THERE'S NOTHING THE media lathers over more solicitously than a good, old-fashioned curio spreading a new spin. In a jaded domain glutted with celebrity tell-alls and the meanderings of a million ghostwriters, the Horatio Alger angle still plays well up and down the elastic

spinal cord of Manhattan.

Which is to say, there are vacancies for Average Guy if he can burst the right artery and bleed on cue. "Rivethead" was rapidly proving this theory.

First off, the novelty factor of an autoworker who actually had something to say, who had a functioning mind, and who could chew Redman and walk at the same time, was a revelation to those whose only exposure to the common laborer was cussing out bellhops or chuckling over some bricklayer's butt cleavage.

I knew better. The factories were full of creative men and women, each of them every bit as capable of destroying

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the fat, bored and stupid myth. Yet, through no scheme of my own, I was thrust into the role of the workingman's surrogate. As a matter of convenience, I was to be Joe Lunchpail's larynx.

The popular reception to the book had the publicity department at Warner scurrying. An ever-expanding itinerary of TV appearances, book signings, newspaper and radio interviews were arranged. Recalling how eager the Catholic teachers of my youth had been to rubber stamp me a failure, I dubbed the upcoming media trek the If The Nuns Could See Me Now Tour.

The official unveiling of the Rivethead was to take place in New York. A sleek limousine greeted my wife Jan and me on arrival. This was already pretty preposterous treatment for a guy whose only distinction just a couple of years earlier had been that he was the only guy on the Rivet Line who didn't know how to change a spark plug.

We went straight from the airport to a radio station in Manhattan. I kept reminding myself: It would either be fun or forget it. The publicity agent from Warner introduced me to the host of the show. As the guy pumped my hand, it occurred to me that at the very same moment my old cronies from Department 07 were saddling up for yet another shift. What the hell was I up to?



An itinerary of TV appearances, book signings, newspaper and radio interviews were arranged. Recalling how eager the Catholic teachers of my youth had been to rubber stamp me a failure, I dubbed the upcoming media trek the If The Nuns Could See Me Now Tour.

The interview had its ups and downs. I was uncomfortable responding to generalizations about the behavior of autoworkers; I spoke for the Rivethead and no one else.

At one point, for reasons still unclear to me, the host blurted, "Just what kind of car does Roger Moore drive?"

"I believe you're referring to Michael Moore," I suggested.

"MICHAEL Moore! That's it!" the host said happily. "What kind of car does he drive?"

I hoped this was a low point, but the confusion of Mike Moore's name with that of Roger Moore's was to be a tour-long trend.

YES, MR. GUMBEL. NO, MR. Gumbel. I don't recall, Mr. Gumbel. I'm sorry, Mr. Gumbel. May I be excused, Mr. Gumbel? Please, Mr. Gumbel! Oh dear God, no! Nooooo!!!

I awoke just as Bryant Gumbel was about to eject me through the roof of 30

Rockefeller Plaza and send me spiraling into the Hudson River. It was 3 a.m., four hours before I was due for a live interview on NBC's "Today" show. I was experiencing a severe case of performance anxiety. I got out of bed and peered out my hotel window at the enormous mausoleums craning into the murky skyline. Why would anyone want to live in this kennel?

Back to bed, I sat up and chain-smoked. I focused in on a conversation I'd had with my shrink just prior to leaving Flint.

"It'll be fine," my doctor said. "Just be yourself."

"What if I don't like myself?" I countered.

"Then, concentrate on being the Rivethead."

We arrived at the "Today" show studio and I took a seat in the green room. One of the other guests scheduled to be on the show, an old guy in a dapper blue suit, was sleeping soundly on a nearby sofa. I felt like bouncing an ashtray off his forehead for daring to

be so unruffled. Didn't he realize that millions were about to gaze into our sad souls?

After a stint in the makeup room, a woman summoned me to the set. I followed her through a large door and a stagehand quietly directed me to one of two chairs situated around a coffee table where a copy of my book rested. As they cut to commercial, I heard a familiar voice shout from behind me: "Hey, Rivethead!" It was Bryant Gumbel.

Suddenly, I felt much more relaxed. Gumbel strode over and flopped himself in the chair across from me. He shook my hand and complimented me on the book. From what I could gather, he'd actually read the thing. This put me even further at ease.

The interview flew by. Gumbel wasn't out for blood. He served me nothing but easy questions and buddy-type banter. When it was over, he even walked back to the green room to surprise my wife, a celebrity freak if there ever was one. Jan took a few snapshots and I practically floated out to the limousine. I had aced my first big test. Even my publicist was impressed. New York was a lovely town.

Another day, another green room. This time I'm feeling remarkably calm. I'm waiting to appear on the "CBS This Morning" show. Across the room, some handsome stranger is signing autographs for several excited women. "Who is that guy?" I ask Jan. She informs me that he's a popular soap opera actor and recording star — Michael Somebody.

"Never heard of him," I reply. "Thankfully, blue-collar authors aren't required to oblige the frenzied wants of hordes of attractive, young females."

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Moments later, as we're watching Michael Somebody chat on the set, a producer enters the green room and announces a possible hitch: One of the longest-held hostages in the Middle East has been released. The producer says the breaking story will likely pre-empt my appearance.

When he departs, I sulk. "How's that for timing? Here I am primed to go, and those damn terrorists have to pick today to clean house? What's wrong with tomorrow?"

The next day, I ham it up during my rescheduled appearance on "CBS This Morning." The host, Harry Smith, spends half the time cracking up as I sling barbs, refer to myself as a "prostitute," and squirm around modeling my "shoprat vogue" wardrobe. At one point, I insist that he hold up a T-shirt advertising my favorite Flint bar. Surprisingly, he obliges.

Back in the green room, I find Jan having her picture taken with none other than Roger Moore, the James Bond edition. He'd apparently caught my act while waiting in the green room. Agent 007 walks over and crushes my hand with his grip, remarking that I am "a very witty chap." I resist the urge to call him Michael and to compliment him on his popular documentary about my hometown.

IT'S A SUNNY MORNING AS I step out of the Lincoln Town Car in front of the "golden towers of the Fisher Building." Directly across the street is GM World Headquarters. Assuming that no one over there would be elated to see me, I follow my promo escort inside the Fisher Building for a taping of "Focus with J.P. McCarthy." Tagging along are my daughter Sonya and a reporter from the Flint Journal. The reporter wants to write a piece about my

publicity exploits. Sonya is just skipping school. Like father, like daughter.

I'm more jittery than I felt at the end of New York. I'm suspicious of McCarthy. I have a hunch he sails and plays golf with the head honchos across the street. This could provide for some unpleasant skull-butting. On top of it all, I have a nagging hangover.

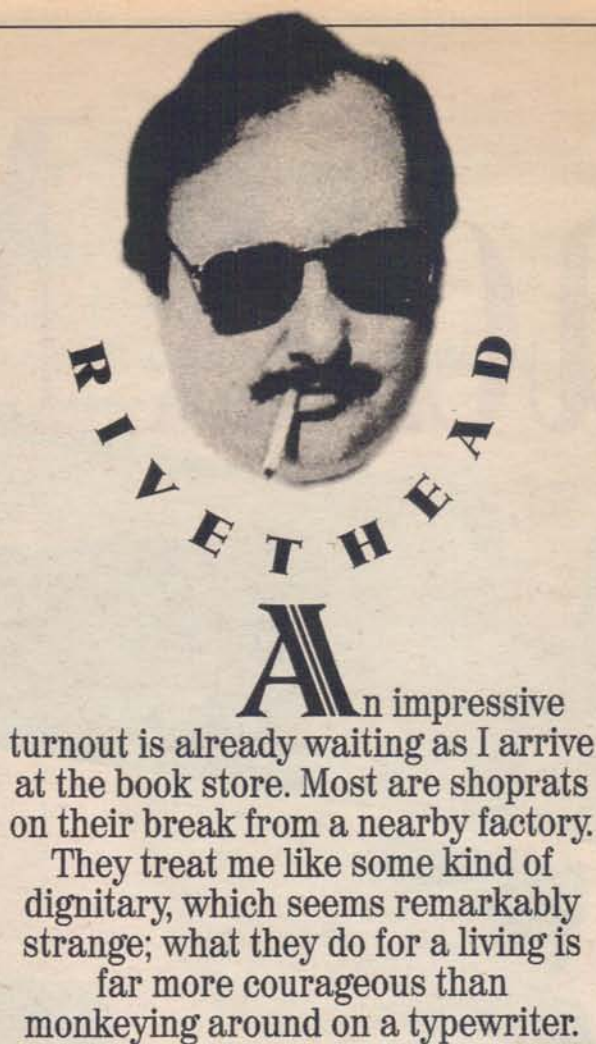
Much to my relief, J.P. goes easy on me. I'm sure he hasn't even bothered to open the book. This theory seems proven when McCarthy

asks me to explain what a shoprat is; he swears he's never heard the term. (Considering he's worked in Michigan longer than I've been alive, I find this hard to swallow.) I give him a nutshell definition of the term, certain that I've just been hoodwinked, patronized or both.

We head off for TV2 and an interview on their noon news. I've got my fingers crossed that my dream anchor, Catherine Leahan, will draw the assignment. I am absolutely positive that I could watch this woman do nothing more than stare into a teleprompter while mumbling the entire contents of the Time-Life series on shelf building and tractor maintenance.

Instead, I'm interviewed by Huel Perkins. Perkins is witty, personable and bright, but he's not Catherine; I'm sure he'd be the first to admit this.

It's time to go sign books. An impressive turnout is already waiting as I arrive at



the Little Professor book store. Most of them are shoprats who have raced over on their break from a nearby factory. One guy asks me to sign his copy to "Toxic Bob." Another wants one made out to "the second-shift seat-loading technicians." We laugh and swap stories. They treat me like some kind of dignitary, which seems remarkably strange considering that what they do for a living is far more courageous than monkeying around on a typewriter.

The time passes too quickly. My promo escort heads me back to Flint where I must catch a plane for Washington, D.C. I have never been there. Then again, I've never been anywhere.

THE IF THE NUNS COULD See Me Now Tour is really picking up. I'm shuttled back and forth between interviews in D.C., Virginia and Maryland. On the third day, a couple of afternoon

appearances are mercifully postponed. My escort suggests that this would be a fine time to tour me around various Washington monuments. I politely decline.

Instead, I have her drop me off at my hotel with the intention of getting some sleep before that evening's live radio show. Unable to sleep, I relocate to the hotel bar, which is swarming with self-important blowhards from the hub of the government district. They sip scotch, I slug beer. Judging by their lethargic

nature, it's little wonder this country is in such a loathsome mess.

Five hours later, I'm still attached to my bar stool. I'm so smashed that I'm actually conversing in loud tones with a group of red-nosed civil servants and drunken lobbyists. I've already reached such a point of loneliness that I would gladly gab with a cadaver.

Suddenly, I hear myself being paged to the lobby. My escort has arrived to transport me to the talk show. I flop into the back seat and gobble down a handful of Certs.

All that I recall from the "Derek McGinty Show" is that the Rivethead is in rare form and that he has to sprint to the men's room during each commercial. The beer has helped me strip off my gloves and I show no mercy to callers who call me a "spokesman for the working class" or want to assail me for not addressing "the social impact of the great American automotive decline."

I tell both of these factions to go out and purchase books by Studs Terkel or Lee Iacocca if they're so in need of sleep.

OVER THE NEXT COUPLE weeks, the tour takes me to Cleveland, Chicago and Toronto. By this time, I can almost predict the questions. The spontaneity has vanished. I scoot through interviews without ever disengaging the automatic pilot.

It frequently occurs to me that I have simply exchanged one assembly line for another. Once the amusement of any endeavor wanes — whether it's assembling tailgates or painting a fence or hustling a book — listlessness sets in and diversions become essential.

To combat the road doldrums, I begin a gluttonous pattern of expense account overkill. Because Warner is picking up the tab for everything, I deny myself nothing. I talk for hours to my wife, my agent, old pals — anyone who will pick up the phone. I ring up room service several times a day and gorge myself on lavish appetizers, desserts and exotic entrees that I can't begin to pronounce. In the evening, I haunt the hotel lounge drinking imported beer, buying numerous rounds and signing outrageous tips.

By the time I arrive back in Flint, my clothes barely fit. I've loaded 20 pounds onto a frame that was paunchy enough to start with. Fortunately, "Rivethead" is selling well, entering the Publisher's Weekly best-seller list just as I'm returning home. At least I'm not the only one getting fat off this deal.

The publicity people at Warner have arranged for several phone-in radio interviews that don't require me to leave my house. I like this setup; I can chat about the book while sitting back in my

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pool shed with a cold drink and a cigarette. Easy does it.

This system works smoothly with the exception of one talk show. I'm a guest on KSDO Radio out of San Diego hosted by Michael Reagan, Ron and Nancy's adopted son.

From the outset, Michael Reagan jumps down my throat regarding the issue of in-plant alcohol consumption. It's as though I've written a book called "Puke Drunk: An Alcoholic's Guide to Industrial Anarchy." He incites his audience to call in and blast off.

I hardly need my telephone to hear these yahoos barking. The program has the feel of some ghastly Carrie Nation temperance rally. One woman screams on and on about how an annoying rattle in her vehicle turned out to be an empty pint of vodka. My flippant reply ("Point that finger somewhere else; I'm strictly a beer man.") only fans the flames.

Callers line up to rip me and condemn my snide attitude. One man asserts that 75 percent of American autoworkers are miscreant drunks. When I ask him where he found the time to breathalize more than 350,000 men and women, he utters a profanity and hangs up.

Even before the book was released, we'd been entertaining offers for film rights to "Rivethhead." Several production companies had latched onto pre-release drafts of the book and were showing interest. David Black hired a West Coast entertainment agent to assist (just what I needed — two agents) and a frantic bidding war ensued.

The eventual procurer of the film rights turned out to be Warner Bros., the same folks who'd snatched up "Roger & Me." This development struck me as humorous and I called up Michael Moore. "Hey," I shouted when he answered, "if

it ain't my Warner Bros. BROTHER!"

I told Mike about the movie deal and mentioned to him how curious it all seemed. "I'm receiving this odd feeling that whenever Warner Bros. develops a craving for the common man, they simply flip open the Flint phone directory and pick a name."

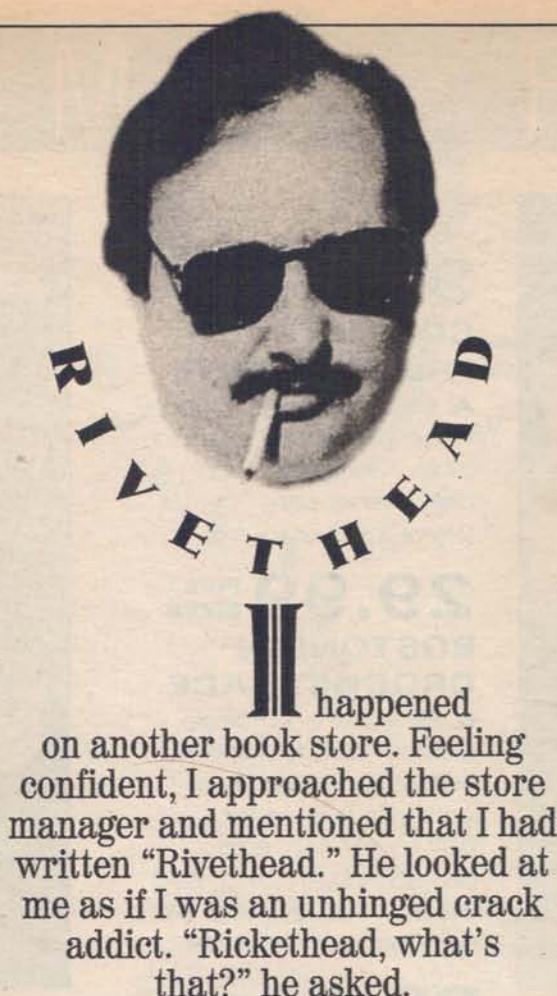
"You may have just solved this insane mystery," Moore said.

As I was mowing the yard one afternoon, I received a phone call beckoning me to Hollywood. The producers who owned the rights to "Rivethhead" wanted to meet with me and introduce me to a possible director they were trying to woo.

Hollywood is a nice place to avoid, but I wouldn't want to live there. I could feel a sense of dread as soon as we slid out of the airport. After a long drive, my escort commented that my hotel was only a mile ahead on the mountain. I strained my eyes but I could see no mountain; apparently the smog had swallowed it.

I wasn't scheduled to meet with the producers until the next day. I decided to take the rented car Warner Bros. had dropped off for me and drive the two miles down to Hollywood Boulevard. I recall thinking to myself that this tawdry sinkhole made New York look like Easter Sunday in Mayberry. It all seemed so decadent and useless.

Walking through hordes of bag ladies, winos, smelly tourists and surly Axl Rose clones, I came across a book



store with a window display of "Rivethhead." I walked inside and identified myself to the sales clerk. She seemed excited to meet me and asked if I would sign all the copies of the book they had in stock. Shucks, find me a pen!

A block later, I happened on another book store. Feeling confident, I approached the store manager and mentioned that I had written "Rivethhead." He looked at me as if I was an unhinged crack addict. "Rickethead, what's that?" he asked. He agreed to check his computer for any listings of a Ben Hamper. Nothing. I excused myself and slunk back to the hotel.

I threw on my best duds for the big meeting. On arrival, I was escorted into a large office where everyone was attired in T-shirts and worn jeans. I could've slugged myself. What had I been thinking? This was California, not Wall Street. Everyone dressed like a bum.

The next afternoon, the producers wanted to meet

over lunch. I made sure to dress down in shorts and a baseball jersey. My driver dropped me off in front of one of the most fashionable eateries in Hollywood. I spotted my lunch group over in a far corner. Each of them was attired in a swank Armani suit. The women in the restaurant all looked like Ivana Trump. I slithered over to the table like a boat person boarding the Queen Mary.

Despite my knack for untimely attire, everything else seemed to go

well. I found the producers to be genuine folk with a great enthusiasm for the film project. The director they were courting seemed like a friendly guy. They all probed me with questions about my life. I spilled every dull detail that was requested.

I, in turn had two simple requests: First, I wanted to have input with the screenplay; if a movie was to be made, I didn't want to discover that my character had somehow been transformed into a 300-pound transvestite mud-wrestling champion. Second, I requested that I be able to appear as myself in any potential nude scenes involving the Rivethhead character and Geena Davis, Beverly D'Angelo or Christina Applegate.

The producers gave me a thumbs up and a thumbs down, respectively.

AFTER HOUNDING THE folks at "Late Night with David Letterman" for several

months, the publicity agent at Warner told me things were looking up. According to sources, Dave had read the book and enjoyed it. This assured us of nothing, but at least he knew my name.

About the time we were ready to give up, I received a phone call from Mary Connelly, a segment producer for the show. She asked if I would be available within the next two weeks. Of course, I answered. Two hours later, she called back and asked if I could get to Flint's Bishop Airport in an hour; they wanted me on the show the next night.

At the hotel the next afternoon, a huge limo picked Jan and me up to take us to the taping. It seemed rather ridiculous as the studio was only a four-block walk. The limo had a sign in the front window that read "Late Night With David Letterman." This attracted many gawkers when we would come to a street-light. They'd peer in the windows expecting to observe a celebrity of some sort. I'd wave back, sorry to disappoint them.

Ten minutes before the taping was to begin, a page entered the green room asking for me. I followed him to the makeup room, where Letterman introduced himself and complimented the book. He asked me a couple questions about Flint, remarking that one of his best friends from college was a Flint native. He wanted to know what my next book was going to cover. I confessed that I wasn't sure. All during this chat, I couldn't help but notice how shy and unassuming Letterman was. It struck me that we were both cut from the same cloth — introverts hawking cynical public personas.

Back in the green room, I spotted something I didn't see everyday: my wife discussing

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clothes with Teri Garr. At the other end of the couch was Graham Kerr, the Galloping Gourmet. We shook hands and turned our attention to the monitor as Dave strolled out on stage. A producer ran in and handed me a list of the five questions Letterman would be asking me. The questions were of a very drab nature, for which I was grateful.

Halfway through the show, I sensed that my appearance was in jeopardy. Teri Garr, a Letterman favorite, was eating up the clock. By the time they got around to Graham Kerr's cooking segment, the show was way behind schedule. Just as Mary Connelly was breaking the news to me, we heard Letterman holler, "Bring out the author to taste this stuff." A stagehand hustled me around the back of the set and practically threw me on stage.

Dave introduced me while handing me a bowl of some god-awful dessert concoction that Kerr had just made. As I took a taste, Letterman stated: "Ben, I bet you guys ate a lot of this stuff while working on the line." I paused a moment and deadpanned: "Yeah, this with a pony keg of Blatz." Letterman cracked up. At least I hadn't blown my only line.

After the show, Graham Kerr kept apologizing over and over, convinced that his cooking demonstration had cost me my segment. I assured him that the slot with Teri Garr had done me in and begged him to relax. The poor guy acted like he was going to



By the time they got around to Graham Kerr's cooking segment, the show was way behind. Just as Mary Connelly was breaking the bad news to me, we heard David Letterman holler, "Bring out the author to taste this stuff."

start bawling.

Mary Connelly came over to reassure me not to fret; I would be invited back shortly. She gave Jan and me a bunch of "Late Night" sweatshirts and caps to take home.

They rescheduled me to appear on Dec. 12th. By this time, I'd had an entire two months to rehearse witty answers to the five questions Dave was to have asked me. Only one problem. The day before we were supposed to fly back to do "Late Night with David Letterman," Mary Connelly called to say that something had come up and I would once again be rescheduled. Watching the show the next night, I realized that "something" was golfer John Daly, a huge blond hulk whose entire vocabulary seemed to consist of the phrases "Yes sir," "No, sir" and "I just try to hit the ball real hard." Not exactly a threat to Thoreau.

I never heard from Mary Connelly again. Tacked up in my pool shed is the index card with the five questions for

Rivethead. The first one reads: "What is a Rivethead?" Occasionally, I stare at the index card and wonder the same thing.

HANDS DOWN, my favorite remembrance from the If The Nuns Could See Me Now Tour took place at the B. Dalton book store in the Genesee Valley Mall in my hometown of Flint. An enormous crowd turned out for the book signing. That in itself was pleasing, but it wasn't so much how many people were there as

who. As I sucked cigarettes and scrawled my name, I would look up and run across one of my old work cronies from the Rivet Line. It seemed as though they were all there: Bob-A-Lou, Jimbo, Dougie, Dan-O, Cam, Johnny, Janice, Red, Herman, Al — even my old foreman Gino decked out in a huge Stetson and a joyous grin. I felt like the Tin Man being awarded his heart.

Everything had come full circle. I sat there and realized how fortunate I was. I had never set out to be an author. I had never envisioned a day when fellow shoprats would stand in line to have me write incredibly maudlin messages on the title page of books. I had never had a game plan, never had a clue.

However, on this great afternoon, as Bob-A-Lou snapped photographs and Dougie showed off his tattoos, I surely had something. Even the nuns couldn't have denied that.

BEN HAMPER is working on a new book.



Q — Why can't we control what's happening in our dreams?

A — Frankly we're sick and tired of showing up for work without any clothes on. And discovering that our spouse is, for some inexplicable reason, the person who fixes the Xerox machine at work. And showing up for a crucial final exam, only to find that the subject is not "super conductors" but rather is "superconductors."

Why are dreams so out-of-control? Why do dreams just happen to us, unlike real life, which at the very least has the superficial appearance of being slightly under our direction?

The key thing to understand is that dreaming is a primitive activity. It's not exclusive to humans. Dogs dream. Rats dream. Bats dream. Almost all mammals dream.

And like humans, they have muscular paralysis when they dream, to prevent them from acting out the hallucination. This means something: That dreams are an ancient evolutionary adaptation, pre-dating humans.

Dreams may have first appeared in living creatures some 140 million years ago, says Jonathan Winson, a neuroscientist at Rockefeller University, and that is "way, way before language, consciousness and human control."

In other words, you can't control your dreams for the same reason that dogs can't convert their feelings into coherent speech — the mental process is too primitive.

You might even think of dreaming as a return to the animal brand of consciousness. This is your life as a dog: You are the protagonist in a drama, things happen to you, you react, you are happy or sad, you are content or fearful. Yet something is missing.

Thoughts! You don't read *reason* when you dream. Sure, you might have some abstract thoughts once in a while, but in general a dream is strangely self-centered and action-oriented.

Why are dreams so dramatic, rather than conceptual? There are all kinds of theories. After decades in which Freudian psychoanalysis reigned, dreams came into disrepute in recent years as some neuroscientists argued that they are just mental junk, stuff that's produced by random electrical activity in the brain. But Winson argues that Freud was fundamentally correct, that dreams really are a "royal road to the unconscious."

Winson's theory is that dreams are a type of filing system.

They are the mechanism by which the unconscious brain (human or otherwise) transfers experiences into memory. And because this mechanism is so biologically ancient, the "language" of dreams must necessarily be experiential, like a movie.

A dog can't store an idea like "I get wet if I go out in the rain" because he has no dog language with which to express this thought, so instead he stores the entire cinematic spectacle, full of sound and fury, of venturing into the rain and getting wet.

Some people learn to control their dreams. This is called "lucid dreaming," but it's a difficult skill to learn if it doesn't come naturally.

Now if we could only find a similar trick that works when we're awake.

Do you have questions? Arguments? Newly unearthed religious scrolls? Write JOEL ACHENBACH, c/o Detroit Free Press Magazine, 321 W. Lafayette, Detroit 48226.